

A Communication from Fr. William A. Wallace, OP

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It was good to see that you republished my 1983 article “Religion and Science: Must There be Conflict?” in the Autumn 1996 issue of the *Bulletin* (Vol. 27, No. 4). As you mentioned in the note introducing it, several points I had made in it should be reconsidered in the present day. One item, however, I would wish to revise in the light of the 1992 report of the Galileo Commission and Pope John Paul II’s address when presenting its results to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. The item occurs in the next to the last paragraph of the article.

There I raised the question whether the norm Cardinal Bellarmine had used at the beginning of the Galileo case was still being invoked, namely, that every finding proposed by a scientist had to be conclusively *demonstrated* before the Church would take it into account. I then added, “To my knowledge it is still in effect. . .” That part of my statement surely requires revision in view of the Pope’s address, for without doubt he relaxed that requirement. He did so when discussing science’s complexity, when he admitted that this makes it almost impossible in the present day to certify any scientific discovery as absolutely true. But, he went on, if a scientific theory cannot be known to be true (the equivalent of *demonstrated* in Bellarmine’s day), at least it should be “seriously and solidly grounded.” And he explained that it was this type of knowledge-input he expected of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. He stated that the purpose of the Academy, as advisors to him, is precisely “to discern, and to make known, in the present state of science and within its proper limits, what can be regarded as an acquired truth or at least enjoying such a degree of probability that it would be imprudent or unreasonable to reject it. In this way, unnecessary conflicts can be avoided.” So the present situation is definitely not as stark as I portrayed it in 1983. And the Pope’s recent statement on evolution seems to me to be a further step in his plan to implement that policy.

Perhaps I should also mention that I found the points made in the same issue by Peter Hodgson and Alfred Kracher very informative. The latter’s comment on the language in which Catholic theologians address issues arising in the science-religion dialogue, which he referred to as “Aristotelian language,” as not being very helpful, struck a resonant chord. But it is not only the theologians who are at fault, Catholic philosophers also must share part of the blame. I have long complained of the neglect in which they have allowed natural philosophy to fall, putting all their emphasis on metaphysics. My own efforts over the years has been to build a bridge between the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of science, to show how they mutually complement each other, and, within a Catholic perspective, can contribute to serious dialogue with revealed theology. In this connection I am happy to report that a book on which I have long been working has finally been published. It is *The Modeling of Nature: Philosophy of Science and Philosophy of Nature in Synthesis* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996). I sincerely recommend it to members of ITEST as laying the groundwork for more enlightened discussions, serving as an intermediary, as it were, between science and theology.